

Moderator (Brindha): Welcome to the webchat “Coming out in a Culturally Diverse Society” with Indian-American author, poet, performer, journalist and 2010-11 Fulbrighter Minal Hajratwala who will join us from California. You will need headphones or speakers to view a short video and to hear Minal’s presentation. Please submit your questions to Minal anytime before or during the program. Your questions will be added to the queue and will be answered after the audio presentation.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Everyone. We will begin the chat in a few minutes. Please feel free to submit your questions at any time.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Welcome, Minal!

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks Amy, it's a pleasure to be here.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): We will begin the presentation now.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Due to technical difficulties, the chat will be text-based.

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks everyone and just to add, the book is available in India from Westland / Tranquebar.

Bryan Dalton, Acting U.S. Consul General in Chennai: Thank you for participating in this unique June Pride webchat. Our theme is “One heart. One world. One Pride.” How appropriate, to share this with you in San Francisco, across oceans and continents, to talk about your book, Leaving India, in which you share the stories of your family over five continents. Thanks to our hosts at Sahodaran for allowing us to conduct this webchat at their office. Good morning to Sunil Menon and his staff. Vanakkam! Special thanks to the Consulate Public Affairs staff for their hard work connecting us through cyberspace to provide a ‘safe space’ for us to discuss “Coming Out in a Culturally Diverse Society”.

Minal Hajratwala: That is a lovely theme. So, what are the questions? :)

Anandaroop: I am the gay partner of the Acting CG. Thank you Minal, for participating in Chennai’s second Pride celebration. As part of the celebration, there was a discussion/support group for parents and friends of LGBT yesterday. One couple came because their daughter had just come out to them about 4 months ago and they wanted to understand and receive support. That discussion reminded me that ‘coming out’ is always about us – our need to be loud and proud in spite (or despite) of homophobia and bigotry. But often, we don’t calculate how our parents will feel: how they might be ashamed to tell the relatives or afraid to hear negative whispers from neighbors. In Leaving India, you came out to the world -- even writing about your first lesbian experience. Did you warn your parents or relatives about the content?

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks, Anandaroopa, for your question. I came out to my parents 20 years ago, so they have had a long time to enjoy having a lesbian daughter. :)

Sahodaran: Hii MiNAL...this is SUNIL MENON from SAHODARAN Chennai,,,AND ON BEHALF OF ALL GATHERED HERE...A big NAMASTE or VANAKKAM(as in Tamil)

Minal Hajratwala: As far as the book, yes, I did give them a manuscript copy to read before it went to press. They helped with many phases of the book research and writing.

Minal Hajratwala: Namaste Sunil. Tell me about Shoadaran and what your group is doing these days?

Minal Hajratwala: (PS sorry everyone for the typos -- I have a very tiny screen to work with here, and I can't really see what I'm typing.)

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Minal, while Sunil responds, I have a question from Rose...

Sahodaran: hi my name is Rose, I am India's first transgender celebrity. I have a question for you, you have come out as a lesbian in the book, but you have been given a award for your book in the bisexual category , can you explain?

Minal Hajratwala: It seems Chennai has quite an active LGBT community. I met a couple of people from Shakti Resource Centere here in San Francisco recently as well.

Minal Hajratwala: Hello Rose, it's an honor to meet you! Yes, it is a bit confusing :)

Minal Hajratwala: You know, when I first came out I was saying very ardently that I was a lesbian.

Minal Hajratwala: However, I was still sleeping with men ... for at least 6 more years after that ...

Minal Hajratwala: So eventually I made peace with the bisexual identity for myself...

Minal Hajratwala: I've been exclusively with women and transgender men for the last decade at least, but I do not disavow my past with men. So I accept both labels for myself.

Minal Hajratwala: My preferred term in the US is actually "queer."

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Sunil has described a little more about Sahodaran. I'll share it with you now.

Minal Hajratwala: Great

Sahodaran: SAHODARAN is a male sexual health program that works on HIV/AIDS prevention amongst Transgender and Gay?bisexual males in the city of Chennai and Pondicherry

magdalene jeyarathnam: Multi-sited ethnography has become an important part of social sciences research these days. Have you or someone else done an academic (anthropology, sociology, etc) research project about your multi-sited family? from Eric at Sahodaran Office

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks Eric. My book is not strictly academic but it does contain a fair amount of historical research, because I was interested in the social, economic, and political contexts in which my family migrated out of India.

Minal Hajratwala: But no, there has been no academic study of my family. And I suspect they have no desire to be studied...

Sahodaran: how easy or difficult is it for indian women in the US, to come out in the US

Minal Hajratwala: one thing that was important to me was that the people who are in the book would feel connected to the book, rather than feeling like little insects under a microscope :) as one sometimes feels when subjected to an academic project.

Minal Hajratwala: I think coming out in the US has become a fairly commonplace occurrence in general because of the radical cultural shifts over the past 20 years, pop culture and activist movements and all that.

Minal Hajratwala: For Indian woman in particular, I think it really depends on the specific family / community.

Minal Hajratwala: When someone's family is very conservative or has strong religious views that are intolerant, of course it is difficult.

Minal Hajratwala: But there is a very strong network of support groups for South Asian LGBTs across North American now. Conferences, a magazine, etc. So in that since, once someone does come out, it is much better than it used to be.

Minal Hajratwala: Sorry mean to say "in that sense"

magdalene jeyarathnam: Might you be able to say anything about possible (or even poetic) connections between exploration of new spaces/places geographically, and in terms of sexual orientation? Definition of place and sexual orientation both seem to involve the questions - Who am I? Where am I? With whom am I communicating? How can/should I behave? -- from Eric at the Sahodaran Office

Minal Hajratwala: While I wait for another question this may be a good time to mention that I will be in India for the upcoming academic year on a Fulbright-Nehru award.

Anandaropa: From Laksmi @ Sahodaran: Have your sexuality influenced your past and future works?

Minal Hajratwala: Yes Eric, I think those questions are very meaningful and important. It's my sense that LGBT people and migrants have something in common which is that by virtue of our circumstances, we have to ask these

questions, "Who am I", at an earlier age and in a more focused way than many other people

Minal Hajratwala: and so I think of a "queer diaspora" which is also something that my friend Gayatri Gopinath has written about from a theoretical perspective

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks Laksmi, yes I think all of the aspects of myself have influenced my writing. I think being and feeling "different" from a young age certainly affects my way of observing the world very carefully, which affects how I write about it

Minal Hajratwala: And this sense of difference comes both from sexuality and from growing up as an Indian child in a very white part of America, feeling quite alienated and different for that reason as well.

Sahodaran: hi this is Angel Gladys, a transgender woman in Chennai. It must have been an arduous task to break down your family tree. How did you manage to achieve this?

Minal Hajratwala: Hi Angel, I was quite lucky because I had two good sources for the family research. First my parents who have kept in touch with everyone very well despite being so far from home. It is actually a very close family.

Minal Hajratwala: And second, I was able to visit the Bhatt who keeps records for our community in Gujarat -- basically a scribe whose family has the records of all of the families of our caste & clan going back 13 generations.

ck: Hi! What advice for parents who observe a LGBT trend in their child, but he/she is hiding it. This is in the Indian context.

Minal Hajratwala: Reflecting on the question about coming out in the US again -- I think one cultural difference may be that over here, the transgender presence is quite nascent as just emerging. Whereas in India it has such a long history and tradition.

magdalene jeyarathnam: Hi, from here in Chennai, I provide counselling for the LGBT community in the US through skype, especially people from TN. Do you think counselling services that cater to Indians should be different?

Minal Hajratwala: I think one mustn't make assumptions about someone's sexuality based on external and secondary characteristics, first of all. For instance there are plenty of tomboys who grow up to be heterosexual, yet some lesbians also grow up being tomboys, yet some lesbians (like me!) have absolutely no inclination toward sports. So for parents, it is good to observe and encourage the child to express himself or herself but not to rush to label it.

Minal Hajratwala: And at the same time, to make it clear that other sexualities are absolutely ok; to develop a diverse circle of friends; to expose the child to films, books, individuals so that if or when the child is ready to declare an identity, they will have a range of options and models and people to talk to.

Minal Hajratwala: Regarding counseling services -

Minal Hajratwala: I think the one thing is to understand the intense importance of the family for Indians. In the US, counseling sometimes is all about individuating, that is getting the person to operate totally as an individual, to break away from the family. In India I think that is sometimes necessary but it is quite difficult. It is more about learning to assert oneself within the family, to be happy and fulfilled while still maintaining strong bonds with family.

Sahodaran: This is from Divya, You have won an award for being a bisexual writer. How do you think you are contributing towards the lesbian and bisexual movements for Indian women across the world?

Minal Hajratwala: And to distinguish between those family duties which are healthy and loving, vs those that are repressive or guilt-induced and so on.

Minal Hajratwala: Hi Divya, I hope I am contributing in two ways. One is by having been actively involved in my community where I live; I was a board member of Trikone, which is the LGBT group for South Asians in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some of you may have seen Trikone magazine is also distributed in India sometimes.

Minal Hajratwala: The second way is simply by being visible, which is still a difficulty for queer Indian women. I was in North India last year for a book tour, and one of the last interviews I did was with the Times of India, an article about coming out to your parents. They quoted several people and among the women, I was the only one quoted with my real name.

Minal Hajratwala: So I hope just by being willing to be out and publicly identified, I am doing some seva.

sahodaran: What do you think of the progress India has made and the amendment of Indian law on homosexuality?

Minal Hajratwala: I am incredibly inspired by the amazing activism happening in India, of which the Section 377 repeal is maybe the most visible victory. I just am so awed by what it must have taken to pull together the coalitions that make such changes possible.

Minal Hajratwala: I am also really delighted that communities like Sahodaran exist and I think much of the LGBT progress is built on the really dedicated work of HIV activists over many decades.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Minal, I'm told you just got an applause from the audience at Sahodaran!

Minal Hajratwala: And the fact that there are now things like pride parades, lesbian parties, a queer store in Mumbai, a queer online bookstore -- it's quite amazing.

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks Amy - well I applaud the audience as well! :)

Sahodaran: This is from Kavya. Do you have a steady partner? What do you think of permanent relationships? How easy or difficult is it to make permanent partners?

Minal Hajratwala: Hi Kavya, I'm currently single. I have been lucky to have wonderful, loving long-term partnerships in the past and I'm sure I will do so again, although when it comes to "permanent" I suppose I'm something of a buddhist -- what is really permanent in this world, after all? :)

Anandaropa: From Divya @ Sahodaran: I am a documentary filmmaker. Did you have any bad experiences with male partners which have encouraged you to become a lesbian?

Minal Hajratwala: I do think there is a challenge for LGBT partners to maintain relationships in a hostile environment without support. In an extended family if a young couple is having trouble, a family member may offer advice or try to help them reconcile. For gay couples they may not receive that kind of support

Minal Hajratwala: and in fact the family may be working to undermine the relationship, so it can be difficult.

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks Divya, no, I have never had any bad experiences with male partners. I don't think I "became" a lesbian so much as I realized I have always had a strong attraction to and emotional affinity for women.

Sahodaran: Do you consider yourself a good speaker as well or just a writer? You have a curious audience for your speech here. This is from JAYA, THE SAHODARAN BEAUTY QUEEN.

Minal Hajratwala: Hello Jaya, congrats on your beauty queen title! Yes, I do speak and perform as well as write. Unfortunately I don't think my internet connection today is strong enough to support audio :)

LRamakrishnan: Your recent Lambda award was in the category of bisexual non-fiction. In your acceptance speech you appreciated the committee's recognition of both bisexual and nonfiction as valid identity categories. Could you speak about bisexuality in particular, and the tendency of people to erase their bisexual histories and identities when they settle down with a partner. As you know there is a lot of pressure from gay/lesbian and straight communities to assimilate into those categories, depending on partner gender. What are the consequences of bisexual erasure for the individual, beyond the resulting invisibility of the community?

Minal Hajratwala: Thanks LR. You know, according to the Kinsey study, and I'm in agreement about this, probably most people in the world, if they were totally free to pursue their desires, would be somewhere in between strict heterosexuality and strict homosexuality. That is, they would probably be bisexual to some extent, whether small or large.

Minal Hajratwala: And I think anytime we are required to suppress our innermost desires, not even being able to admit them to ourselves, that has consequences for

the psyche. It is ok to say, Yes I have this desire and I choose to act or not act on it.

Minal Hajratwala: But to not even be able to admit one's own desire -- it seems rather sad.

ck: Coming back to your unbelievable research in tracing your family roots... do you have an idea if any of your 36 first cousins are LGBT and are contributing in some way to the cause. kudos to your fantastic work!

Minal Hajratwala: Thank you, ck. Let me say it this way -- so far, no one in my family has yet come out to me. :)

Sahodaran: Have you come across any discrimination because of your sexuality?

Minal Hajratwala: But I do have cousins, as well as my brother and sister-in-law, who have been fantastic allies.

Minal Hajratwala: Discrimination -- no, on the contrary, I feel that being open about who I am has allowed me to be part of an amazing community and has opened doors and friendships that I would not otherwise have. Small incidents of ignorance, yes, but far overshadowed by the beauty and rewards.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): A note to our audience: We are coming to the end of our time with Minal.

Minal Hajratwala: It has been such a pleasure to chat with you all! Is there one last question Amy?

Sahodaran: Do you think you would have come out if you were born raised and lived in India?

Minal Hajratwala: Yes, without a doubt. I might have come out even sooner, since I would have probably gone to a girls' school -- I hear that all kinds of interesting things happen there. :)

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): To borrow your phrase, Minal, I believe that you have opened up many doors and friendships today. I'd like to share some of the messages that the audience is sending to thank you.

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): that should be "doors!"

Sahodaran: We at SAHODARAN, have thoroughly enjoyed this session, and am truly honored to be given this opportunity

Sahodaran: Ms. Ramba wants to host you at Sahodaran in Chennai. She would very happy to welcome you here in the community.

Anandaroopu: From Kavya @ Sahodaran: My mobile is +91 99412 262993. Call me.

ck: :) THANKS!

Sahodaran: This has been a truly rewarding and exciting experience for all of us at SAHODARAN, and we would like to take this opportunity to thank the YOU and US consul and

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): And they're clapping. :)

Minal Hajratwala: Thank you so much, everyone, and especially the Consulate for hosting us. I hope we will meet in person some day. As we say in Gujarati, awjo!

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Minal, we hope that we can find a time to continue this discussion when you are in India on your Fulbright.

Minal Hajratwala: Yes, definitely. And then we will be on the same time zone. :) Good night all, it's bedtime for me!

Amy, U.S. Consulate (Moderator): Thank you again, Minal. On behalf of the US Consulate in Chennai and our friends at Sahodaran, thank you so much!